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In the view of many, both now and then, the golden age of international relations was the 18th century, the century of the classic Balance of Power international system. Diplomatic intercourse and international comity did indeed grow and policy became both more predictable and more conservative. The essential purpose of balance of power was the perpetuation of the status quo and that guaranteed the sovereignty of the weak. Then came Frederick II whose eschewal of inhibition, consensus, and civility in statecraft pruned the golden age to but a golden moment.

THE HEYDAY OF THE BALANCE OF POWER: FREDERICK THE GREAT AND THE DECLINE OF THE OLD REGIME

by
James A. Nathan

Introduction. By the middle of the 18th century, the balance of power was almost universally acclaimed as an indispensable condition of European statecraft. Yet, both the moderation and consensus that accompanied the 18th-century international community were short-lived. Vying with the development of policies and institutions aimed at an overall European equilibrium were potent forces of disorder: specifically, the national assertions of Prussia, leading to fissures of a system that relied, on the one hand, on moderation and consensus, and on the other, on opportunism and violence.

Because the balance of power failed to operate effectively, it gave way to its Nemesis: unscrupulous statesmanship. Hence it can be argued—contrary to the

conclusions of most who refer to the 18th-century balance of power—that the origins of the breakdown of European order are not to be found merely in the cataclysm of the French Revolution, but instead can be traced to three additional factors:

1. An absence of central authority or even a semblance of a public monopoly of superior force in the post-Utrecht (1714) international system;

2. the incapacity of universal European values to limit the appetite of some of the more established states; and

3. the rise of ambitious parvenu states, especially Prussia and, to a lesser extent, Russia.

In our time those who almost longingly recall the old state system have seemed unmindful of the very

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modest success of even its best years.* Indeed, to many, in retrospect, the 18th century seemed a "golden age"*** in the history of the nation-state system. But the period of a functioning balance of power was, in truth, more a fragile generation than a durable epoch.

International Moderation and Consensus and the Eighteenth Century Balance of Power. A number of social and political developments encouraged the moderation that characterized both the means and the ends of the "classic" 18th-century balance of power system. The great coalitions against Louis XIV had left most European states exhausted, and a bit less interested in the mere glory of nations or kings.¹ After the death of Louis XIV, France's chief government minister, Cardinal Fleury, assumed the regency for young Louis XV. Fleury was 73 years old when he took office and 90 when he died. He was not in a position (nor did he desire) to initiate great plans

for the distant future. When Louis XV finally came to rule, he proved to be lazy and self-indulgent, little concerned with the glory of France. Public affairs fell increasingly into the hands of merchants and financiers disinterested in diplomatic great departures. Britain's Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, had a personal motto that could have summarized the early 18th century: "Let sleeping dogs lie,"² he would say over and over again.

Moreover, the passions of patriotism, although certainly a factor in the vast mobilizations of England, Holland, and France during the wars of Louis XIV, did not dominate international politics. For instance, it was unthinkable to ask for "unconditional surrender" or to make the kind of mass appeals as those that occurred later with the coming of nationalism, when whole peoples called for the submission of other whole peoples. National feeling existed, but the disruption of any final diplomatic settlement based on "national interests" was not permitted. In the mid-18th century there was simply too much distance between those who led and those who followed. In fact, only a fraction of the population concerned itself with foreign affairs.³ Statesmen were not yet compelled by public opinion. Bolingbroke would write to his friend, Lord Bathurst, concerning the masses:

I would rather be a dog, my lord, and bay at the moon than be obliged to roar and rant eternally in that note which the humor, the passion, the ignorance, and the incapacity of power sets in. The only popularity worth having is that which will sooner or later arise from the steady pursuit of national interests.⁴

Nevertheless, there was a change from the practice of the 17th century. As diplomatic intercourse and comity between states grew, the execution of foreign policy expanded beyond the

*The portrayal of a European balance of power distinguished by its brevity and tentativeness is a minority position, to be generous. Still, there are even harsher judgments. For a flawed but powerful statement that European politics before the French Revolution were mere extensions of the dictums of *raison d'état* and *saute qui peut*, see Albert Sorel, *Europe and the French Revolution: The Political Traditions of the Old Regime*, trans. and ed. by Alfred Cobban and J.W. Hunt (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1971).

**The common understanding of the 18th-century international system as a "golden age" is reflected in the following volumes: Walter L. Dorn, *Competition for Empire: 1740-1763* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1940); Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: Norton, 1955), pp. 36-40, *passim*; Kyung-Won Kim, *Revolution and the International System* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), especially chap. I; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 189; Robert B. Mowat, *The European State System* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929); Richard N. Rosecrance, *Action and Reaction in World Politics: International Systems in Perspective* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), especially chap. I.

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purview of a few clerks and several ambassadors. The increase in diplomatic functions necessitated the development of foreign offices with separate departments, intelligence operations, lawyers and a permanent staff of officers of various rank who were sent abroad to manage the affairs of their respective countries. The "interests of state" were no longer decided by the king alone (they had not been for some time in England), but by wealthy merchants, financiers, holders of title and inherited wealth, and the royal family. This devolution of foreign policy to bureaucrats and numerous groups helped to make policy both more predictable and more conservative.

International moderation was also supported by the expanded use of trade as a foreign policy instrument. As Professor Nef once pointed out, "fighting with new weapons [such as improved cannons and bayonets] was not heading toward very satisfactory results in either territory or trade gained" in the 18th century. "So statesmen turned increasingly to another kind of weapon, to duties, prohibitions against imports, and to preferential treatment of colonial trade."⁵ David Hume had brilliantly demolished the theory of exclusive commercial exploitation, arguing that trade created mutual advantages,⁶ but British mercantilist statesmen were not convinced. To them, commercial policy was "high" policy.⁷ States fought for "favorable" balances of trade just as they fought for "favorable" balances of power, and this common search for expanded commercial and military power resulted in an equilibrium of power—a fact that statesmen took to be as immutable as geography.

Perhaps the most important elements of moderation in the conduct of 18th-century interstate relations occurred on the battlefield. The development of standing armies, the necessity of giving troops regular

clothing, food and shelter, and the improvement in discipline reduced both the incentive and the opportunity for looting and lawlessness. As the acquisition and maintenance of soldiers (and the saltpeter necessary for the manufacture of gunpowder) grew more costly, commanders hesitated to expend their resources frivolously.⁸

On the homefront it became commonplace for soldiers to be stationed in garrisons, while a goodly number of others was sent to far-off colonies or to sea. Naval battles were inherently less costly in human life, and the stationing of soldiers abroad reduced the opportunities for, and the intensity of, combat in Europe. Losing armies were not annihilated on the battlefield with any great frequency. There was, in fact, an expectation that they would get away. The sight of blood revolted this rather humane epoch. And soldiers were no less sensitive to the sight of their own fluids than were gentler minds of the day. In fact, the rationale for giving troops red uniforms was to diminish soldiers' fright upon witnessing the blood of their comrades. Likewise, the decks of fighting ships were painted red so that sailors would not take undue notice of the carnage.

Soldiers' zeal for pursuit was further dampened by the invention of bayonets which first appeared in the 1680s and gradually replaced the pike, a cumbersome weapon measuring up to 18 feet in length. By the early 18th century the bayonet-equipped musketeer, armed with the safer, faster-firing flintlock, could face cavalry alone, if properly drilled. Rigorous training of infantry, indeed large armies, was a consequence of the invention of an accurate rapid-fire, steel-tipped rifle.⁹ Yet, the prospect of using bayonets—of stabbing or being stabbed by a cold blade and then having the weapon dislodged by a bullet—was horrifying. Consequently, armies, no matter how well drilled,

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operated without much sanguinary passion and tended to avoid each other.¹⁰ Moreover, soldiers, almost bereft of earthly possessions, were often bludgeoned into battle by brutal drill and discipline. Frequently, armies reluctantly dragooned from streets or prisons found themselves fighting on loan for some contracting principality in Europe. Such men as these rarely made for enthusiastic land encounters.

Declining zeal for combat helped precipitate the 18th-century effort to limit and regulate battlefield engagements. International law was, therefore, able to moderate the conduct of hostilities by demanding that war be declared formally and ended formally. It was also increasingly acknowledged that war should be waged with due concern for noncombatants and prisoners of war. Even in time of war, Europeans traveled and traded with each other with few official impediments. It was the time of the "Enlightenment,"* when religious passions had finally ebbed and when the *philosophes* would speak of the reason that all men could, and eventually would, attain.

Prussia: The Militarization of a Moderate International Order. By and large, the wars that broke out by the mid-18th century had two loci. One was between Britain and France for commerce and colonies. The other was the competition for territory and power in east central Europe. The latter struggle was marked by Prussia's rise

from a highly militarized provincial German state to a great power, rivaling Austria in power and pretense. The English-French rivalry and the contest that centered in Germany became intertwined. But in terms of the old European order, they can be thought of separately. The Anglo-French wars were waged mainly overseas about issues that, although considered important, were hardly critical to the structure of European society. When Canada changed hands as a result of the Seven Years' War, Voltaire's reaction was typical of the European attitude: he considered that part of North America but "a few miserable acres of snow."¹¹ The struggle in central and eastern Europe, however, was seen to be of more lasting importance, and it had near-fatal consequences for the norms of moderation upon which the balance of power was constructed and maintained.

Frederick the Great's father, Frederick William, inherited an area that had no independent status at all until the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). Prussian nobles were known for their ferocity and skill in raising, maintaining and directing soldiers. In all, however, Frederick William had more than an ordinary Prussian's enthusiasm for military prowess. By giving troops an iron ramrod to pound down the powder charges in muskets (instead of wooden ones, which were fit poorly and splintered), and by paying extraordinary attention to close-order drill,*

*The military doctrine of the day was beholden to the Enlightenment. Hence, strategists stressed the importance of maneuver, reason and cleverness in battle. Commanders often attempted to prolong campaigns merely to exhaust an opponent's treasury rather than to attempt to defeat the opposition. Some "visionaries" objected to this mode of warfare, and with the rise of national armies and nationalism, battlefield casualties rose dramatically.

*Generally, every 18th-century European army was brutally drilled. Martinet, after all, was a Frenchman. But even so, Prussia under Frederick William and his son, Frederick had a reputation for excess. See Jay Luvas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (New York: Free Press, 1966), pp. 12-13, Henry Lloyd, *History of the Late War in Germany* (London: 1766-81), v. II, p. xxxviii and E.W. Lloyd, *A Review of the History of Infantry* (London: Longmans, Green, 1908), pp. 154-155.

Frederick William greatly augmented that considerable army's capacity for rapid fire and maneuver. Then, too, his stringently prudent economic policies encouraged the increased conscription of his own people, rather than relying on more expensive and less dependable mercenaries as was the mode in Europe. Proportionate to the population (1:25 as compared to 1:150 in France),¹² it was the largest army in Europe. And although not preeminent in absolute numbers (perhaps 80,000), it was a force to reckon with.

Frederick William's legacy was this impressive army, a centralized administrative system more autocratic than any other in Europe, and his son, Frederick II. Frederick's father had readily terrorized both the Prussian populace and his son. When the people of Berlin hid from Frederick William as he passed through the streets, he chased after them brandishing his walking stick, exhorting them not to run but rather, as he put it, to "love me, scum." Frederick William suspected his son of being in league with his enemies, the English. Because of young Frederick's interest in arts and letters, his father believed him to be not really a man.* Frederick often suffered his father's blows and regularly was denied food so that relatives and servants had to feed him on the sly. At one point he tried to run away to England with his single boyhood friend, yet, his plan was compromised. Frederick's father had his son imprisoned. Just before the adolescent Frederick fainted, he saw his

only close friend beheaded on order of his father.¹³

After Frederick William's death, Prussia found itself directed by a man steeped in the Enlightenment. The young prince wrote and spoke well only in French. Many of his policies (particularly his domestic reforms)—some of which began under Frederick William—produced a moderate criminal system, efficient graduated taxes and encouraged religious toleration, and made him the darling of the French *philosophes*, especially Voltaire. In external politics, however, Frederick's only limits were those established by Prussian power and a disposition in his later life toward prudence. In a sense, Frederick's foreign policy was the greatest force for disruption in the 18th century exclusive of the French Revolution.

* * * * *

Frederick succeeded to the throne in 1740. Within the year he had seized Silesia from Austria. It was a daring campaign lasting only 7 weeks. In one stroke Frederick claimed territory half again the size of Prussia of Frederick William. Silesia had been the richest province in the Austrian empire. In contrast to the poorly endowed estates of Brandenburg and Prussia, it was a bountiful agricultural land, possessing large tracts of forest and immense quantities of coal and iron. But Frederick's claim to the people and the area were of dubious legality. The taking of Silesia by launching a war without warning was considered outrageous by most statesmen in Europe. As Frederick himself later gloated, Europe was unpleasantly "amazed" by his audacity.¹⁴ Frederick confessed that the general view of Europe was that only a man who did not believe in God would commit such a rapacious act.¹⁵ "That man is mad," Louis XV concluded.¹⁶

*Toward the latter charge, there is testimony of a Swiss physician who claimed that Frederick's adolescence was marked by a catastrophic surgical attempt to cure a "social disease" that resulted in a permanent physiological impairment. In any case, after adolescence, Frederick never showed any evidence of interest in women. See Dr. J.G. Zimmermann, *Select Views of Life, Reign, and Character of Frederick the Great, King of Prussia* (London: Hookham & Carpenter and F. Newbery, 1792), v. 1, pp. 44-67.

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The seizure of Silesia overturned one of the operating principles of the balance of power as it had come to be understood by the mid-18th century. The balance of power had been seen as a reliable guarantor of national independence. Previously, there had been a ... general recognition that the destruction of an independent sovereignty was an exceptional and normally an unjustifiable act which ultimately protected many of the small states of Europe, some no larger than a single city, from absorption by the greater powers. Even in the eighteenth century, when the power of the larger states was increasing rapidly, contemporary opinion, influenced by the classical city-state ideal, held up the smaller states for admiration and believed in their independence.¹⁷

Frederick's annexation was "illegitimate" in both a legal sense and in terms of the reigning consensus underlying the fragile and rather recent stability of Europe. The annexation of Silesia proved to be the beginning of the final breaking of inhibitions against large-scale changes in the status quo,¹⁸ implying that a case for expansion was not necessary beyond simple military ambition and the subsequent interest that any unfounded claim might require.

To the statesmen of the day, the essential purpose of the 18th-century balance of power was the perpetuation of the European status quo. The balance did not require peace; quite the contrary. The balance of power relied on an assumption that any state might align itself with any other—if, by making such an arrangement the overall European political equilibrium and individual interests of states might be enhanced. Alliances shifted and numerous wars were fought, usually with the result of restoring the *status quo ante bellum*. Still, the novelty of this short-lived balance of power system was less in its mechanisms than in its self-

conscious articulation and celebration.¹⁹ One mid-18th-century essayist, Charles D'Avenant, was typical:

As the Earth is now divided into several Kingdomes, Principalities and States, between 'em Wars will happen, but the Weaker fortifie themselves by Alliances with the Stronger; so that (unless some Great Oppressor rises up to disturb the World with his Ambition) we have many more years of peace than of War; whereas in Universal Empires every day had its different Calamities....²⁰

By and large, territorial compensation for victory and loss in combat or diplomacy before Frederick's seizure of Silesia had been carved out from the vast overseas possessions of the European powers. In this way states usually retained their frontiers and their dignity. For, although the colonies were a source of wealth and pride, they were not yet considered integral or essential to any state's legal, political or moral existence.

Frederick's motives in literally stealing Silesia could have been frivolously simple. Most probably, he acted out of simple opportunism. He explained himself to an English admirer: "I was young, had plenty of money, a big army, and wanted to see my name in the newspapers."²¹ He may have wished, in some ultimate sense, to feel himself worthy of approval and esteem from his irascible dead father.²² Later, however, Frederick gave a more elegant, *Realpolitik* justification:

The acquisition of Silesia increased Prussian revenues by 36,000 thalers. The greater part of that sum was used to increase the army. We shall presently have the use Frederick made of these troops... Silesia was united to Prussia... the principal cause of the successful conquest was the army which had been formed in the course of twenty-two years by admirable

discipline and was superior to all other troops in Europe.²³

The "operational code" of Frederick's statecraft violated the nascent sense of European community. Good relations between diplomats were possible when the ruling houses of Europe shared the same traditions of culture and civility toward one another. One of the most eminent students of this period has written that the aristocracy and ruling houses

... were forged together by family ties... common cultural values and... common moral convictions about what a gentleman was, and was not allowed to do with his relations with other gentlemen. Indeed, the gentility of the eighteenth century promoted that attention to group interests on which the system rested.²⁴

But, Frederick felt disdain for any contemporary code or values of interstate comity. As he revealed in a marginal note to himself in his volume of Tacitus:

No ministers at home but clerks.
No ambassadors abroad but spies.
Formal alliances only to sow animosities. Kindle and prolong wars between neighbors. Always promise help and never send it.²⁵

Some of Frederick's contemporaries may have contemplated unscrupulous depredations like those of Frederick. For instance, one of Louis XV's advisors, the Count of Broglie, counseled, "A great power with a grand design first carries it out in spite of general indignation, then makes the reckoning with its neighbors; and the balance of the account is always favorable."²⁶ All in all, however, most statesmen were inhibited by more moderate norms of the time.

Yet in Frederick's view, foreign policy was a scientific study of how to gain advantage. To Frederick, since all other states were similarly selfish, any balance of power could only be

maintained, in effect, by arms races, preemptive wars and the coupling of ends with means virtually unlimited by considerations of laws or ethics.²⁷ In a more or less modern international environment this was a revolutionary notion of political conduct. Few others in Europe would publicly or even privately make any such assertion as Frederick's to the effect that "European politics are so fallacious that even sages become dupes, if they are not on the alert..."²⁸ When one of Frederick's ministers drafted a convoluted juridical explanation for the Prussian to claim Silesia, Frederick wrote on the back of the document a cynical but evidently sincere compliment: "Bravo: the work of an excellent charlatan."²⁹

Two principles in international law had been evolving. But they were in tension with each other. One was *practa sunt servanda* (treaties must be served). This maxim held that treaties were like private contracts. To fail to live up to them just because of temporary disadvantage would be wrong. The other principle was *rebus sic stantibus* (treaties are valid only as long as conditions remain unchanged). To this latter principle, Frederick's writing and action subscribed. When a war broke out nearby, counseled Frederick, a wise prince did not stay neutral, even when obligated by formal agreements. For, "by remaining neutral he risked everything and would expect to gain nothing."³⁰ Treaties, to Frederick, were but the most transient of arrangements. In the preface of his "History of My Own Times" he wrote:

The interest of the state ought to serve as the rule of the monarch. Princes are slaves to their means, the interests of states prescribe laws to them, and that law is inviolable... Examples of treaties... broken are frequent. It is not our intention to justify them all....

...[It] appears evident that a

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private person ought to be scrupulously tenacious of his promise.... If he does an injustice [others] can have recourse to the protection of the laws... [anyway]... an individual alone suffers... while a sovereign may draw calamities upon nations.³¹

To Frederick, even the most fundamental elements of international law, such as sovereign immunity, could succumb to "reasons of state." Thus, in 1756, suspecting wrongly that a plot was being hatched against him and that the proof could be found in the diplomatic archives of Dresden, Frederick invaded the city without warning. The archives of state, guarded personally by the Queen of Saxony, mother of the Queen of Spain, heir apparent of France and cousin of Maria Theresa, was seized. The Saxon Queen was pushed aside so that the incriminating (but nonexistent) diplomatic correspondence, which all Europeans considered privileged, might be discovered and published.

Although he was as well-bred as any Enlightenment prince, Frederick scorned civility. He insulted Empress Maria Theresa of Austria with puns and lewd jokes, and offered enormous bribes to the King of France's mistress for a favorable end to the Seven Years' War, but he never "allowed himself to forget for one moment that she was descended from butlers and fish vendors and that both of her parents were procurers...."³² The Czarina Elizabeth was also the object of Frederick's obscenities. Her love of vodka and men was legendary. But his notice of it was unkind at best.

Once while Frederick was entertaining a French gentleman... a sprightly hussar entered the room. Pointing to him, Frederick remarked, unsmilingly, "That fellow has the handsomest penis in my dominions. I am going to send him as ambassador to Russia." The story was relayed via the Austrian

and Saxon ambassadors to... the Russian Imperial Chancellor, who was also Elizabeth's lover. Needless to say, both were apoplectic.³³

Frederick's misanthropy was not without purpose. He understood that in a world of gentility and at least a pretense of respect among royal houses, despicably ill-mannered words could yield an advantage. As Frederick told his longtime associate, De Catty:

As long as I breathe, my dear sir, I shall poke fun at these people who are so implacable against me. If I cannot hurt them, at least I will shock them and exasperate them as much as I can.... It is not difficult my friend, to point defects... I make it my business... I will in turn, employ... my pen and ink to hurl bolts at them which will anger them and drive them to despair. Thus, like Hercules, I will lay low this Hydra of enemies.³⁴

In the 18th century, diplomacy moved away from the Renaissance idea that envoys were sent abroad to deceive and spy, and the expanded use of diplomats with elaborate protocol and rules, tempered, slowed and regulated interstate activity. To Francois de Callieres and those schooled in the French diplomatic method (and most of the great houses of Europe would be included) a dishonest diplomat was like a shady banker or businessman: one who has a reputation for being shifty soon loses his customers, credit and credibility. As De Callieres, in his great work, *On the Manner of Negotiating with Princes* wrote:

The good negotiator will never rely... on... bad faith.... [A] lie always leaves a drop of poison behind and even the most dazzling success gained by dishonesty stands on an insecure foundation, for it awakens in the defeated party a sense of aggravation, a desire for vengeance, and a hatred which must remain a... foe.³⁵

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In commerce or relations between states, deception has rarely been good business and was never good for the business environment. By about the mid-18th century, many Europeans began to feel that the real purpose of diplomacy was "to harmonize the real interest of the parties concerned." The craft of an envoy was negotiation, i.e., the making of agreements. Therefore, De Callieres concluded:

The ambassador should be a man of peace... who works by persuasion... [T]he great secret of negotiating is to bring out prominently the common advantage of both parties of a proposal and so link these advantages that they may appear equally balanced to both parties.³⁶

In the early and mid-18th century, diplomacy was the usual means of gaining advantage. But Frederick nearly dispensed with the "new" diplomacy of the 18th century. Unlike other sovereigns of his day, Frederick did not use diplomats or believe it to be a diplomatic function to negotiate on behalf of sovereigns. Negotiation, to him, was merely a calculation of military potential, not the attenuation of conflicting interests. It was not that he was unwilling to negotiate; he was—but only to gain what he knew were respite in his quest for advantage.

Frederick preferred lower rank "envoys" to ambassadors inasmuch as such individuals, it was considered, needed less talent. Besides, to Frederick, they were essentially "letter carriers."³⁷ Therefore, his negotiators were neither significant individuals nor the honest ones that De Callieres advised. Frederick counseled Valoir, the French envoy to Berlin:

You are a witty man and a man of superior understanding. But in the post of ambassador you are yet a novice. I will therefore give you a piece of advice: if you have anything to negotiate, apply

directly to me. My people will deceive you—that is what I pay them for.³⁸

In the 18th century, there evolved the budding of a kind of parallel relationship between force and diplomacy. Force was a "last resort," but it could be used without undue fear because violence was not as awful as it had been or was to become. Thus force stood at the side of diplomacy, neither overshadowing it nor hindering its use. Frederick used both his army and his statecraft to his obvious advantage with little thought to European tradition. By discounting those elements of inhibition, consensus and civility in international society, Frederick augmented Prussian power but decreased the stability of the balance of power. This was a design of his statesmanship. In time, its effects were to take their toll on events in Europe and the moderation and consensus that characterized the 18th-century international community.

The Perils of an Expanded Europe. By participating in the dismemberment of a European state that had been a part of European society for 600 years—Poland was closer in culture and character to Western Europe than Prussia itself—Frederick demonstrated the fragile order the balance of power gave to interstate relations. Prussia, even with the addition of Silesia, had seemed on the frontier of Europe. Indeed, Voltaire had called Frederick "King of the Border Zones."³⁹ By mid-18th century, though, the edge of Europe was almost 100 miles to the east. The partition of Poland in 1772 was undertaken to join the geographically divided domain of east and west Prussia. Catherine the Great, who had been engaged for some time with a Polish insurgency, was willing to cooperate, as was, reluctantly, Maria Theresa, Frederick's Austrian opponent.

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Maria Theresa knew her act was a violation of European norms, but the temptation of a vast new polyglot realm proved irresistible. Frederick's sardonic comment on her hesitation was, "She weeps, but she takes." Maria Theresa was not, however, unaware of the kind of effect the Polish partition was liable to have on the public order of Europe. "Long after I am dead," she despaired, "it will be known to what this violation of all that was hitherto held sacred will give rise."⁴⁰ Edmund Burke wrote:

Pray, dear sir, what is next? ... Poland was breakfast, and there are not many Polands to be found. Where will they dine? After all our love of tranquility and all expedients to preserve it, alas poor peace.⁴¹

The partition of Poland, writes Robert B. Mowat, the Oxford historian, was a "brutal crime in the face of the known and acknowledged law of nations." Previously, annexations had been

... indemnities at the end of wars, or as the result of exchanges, or of hereditary succession.... The annexations made by Austria, Russia and Prussia could not be defended on the grounds of costs of warfare, of exchange and of compensation.... They were pure brigandage, the robbing of a neighbor carried out in time of peace by these powers against a helpless neighbor.⁴²

The balance of power had been held by Europeans as a guarantor of the sovereignty of the weak. But after the partition of Poland, as Albert Sorel wrote, "The weak states noted with terror the development of a practice which threatened them all. It... became a part of European custom and the flexible doctrine of equilibrium."⁴³ Indeed, the Polish example was followed by the partial division of the Ottoman Empire undertaken by Russia and Austria in 1782, followed by further partitions of Poland in 1792 and 1795.

On the frontier of Europe a malign principle arose and thrived; it finally engulfed Europe.⁴⁴

Frederick's ambition for more German land and his almost obsessive husbanding of state power forced Austria to cease opposing Russian advances to the west, which had begun with Peter the Great in the late 17th century. By forcing Austria to seek Russia as an ally and then by coopting Russia into the partition of Poland in 1772, Frederick added another previously all but irrelevant member to international society. Russia, slowly drawn into new calculations regarding the European balance of power, was still a semibarbarous state. In diplomacy, Russia shared few of the cultural hesitations or familial inhibitions with the rest of Europe. In warfare, Russian soldiers were known for their excesses. In 1759, for example, during the Seven Years' War, warfare in central Europe returned to some of the savagery that had been the norm in the Thirty Years' War. "The Russians," writes British historian Nancy Mitford, "committed every atrocity under the sun and raped everybody, including the Burgomaster of Beuthen, whose wife said she really thought they might stick to women."⁴⁵ "Nothing like it had been seen since the invasion of the Huns," read one account. "Inhabitants were hanged after their noses and ears were cut off, their limbs were torn away, their entrails and hearts opened."⁴⁶

The addition of a still backward Russia to the European system of the balance of power and the division of most of Germany into two great states—Austria and Prussia—brought further difficulties to European equilibrium. The addition of diverse nontraditional "actors" in the emerging 18th-century international system increased the potential for conflicts of interest within that system. By augmenting the number of states engaged in an arms competition, the

possibility of regulating such competition diminished.⁴⁷ And by enlarging the number of potential allies, policy-making became more uncertain as misapprehension about motives increased. The addition of new "great powers" to the international system of the 18th century made the system inherently more unpredictable and, to that extent, more unstable. War might now occur not only because of willful strategies but also as the result of the inability to calculate and accommodate the intentions of others. This was especially the case as new "actors" refused to play by, or even give lipservice to, many of the old rules that had moderated diplomatic behavior.

Disorder was exacerbated by "legitimizing" the notion that a European equilibrium could be produced by the mutual search for a competitive edge through arms races* and preemptive attacks. The practice of this dogma propagated by Frederick soon swept Europe. As Montesquieu despaired:

A new disease has spread through Europe.... It has attacked our princes and makes them maintain a disproportionate number of troops.... As soon as one state increases the number called into service, the others immediately do the same, with the result that nothing is gained thereby but the common ruin. Each monarch keeps in readiness as many armies as he would need if his people were in danger, and this condition of rivalry of all against all is called peace.⁴⁸

*"Arms races" may be a bit of a misnomer inasmuch as the quality of weaponry remained equally accessible to almost all powers before the Industrial Revolution. But competition regarding leadership, finance, supply and mobilization capability was intensified as a result of Frederick's depredations.

Conclusion. The fragile and short-lived success of the 18th-century balance of power rested on moderation and consensus. Frederick's wars, in tactics, aims and volume of violence, were destructive of that consensus. Richard Rosecrance, a political scientist, summarizes most recent scholarship regarding the salad days of the balance of power when he writes:

A balance of power mechanism could hardly have functioned in a context in which... protagonists were bent on advancing their separate interests against general European concerns.... A minimum homogeneity of outlook... [a] unit of sentiment and ideas... among the great powers was a necessity of such a system.⁴⁹

The aim of the new "French system" of diplomacy had been to secure at the conference table, by adjustment of contending interests, a moderate international order wherein states could not be termed either sated or *revanchist*. Classic diplomacy was largely predicated on reason and comity between states. Respect for sovereign immunity and other injunctions of law and protocol facilitated negotiations. As Richelieu contended, the observance of treaties is always the wisest course, for the "greatest strength of sovereigns comes from doing this."⁵⁰ His advice, however, served but two generations of European statesmen.

For a short time, war, although an instrument of diplomacy, was used mainly when diplomacy and accommodation had failed. The classic diplomatic mold was shattered when Frederick and his rival, Catherine the Great of Russia, found that diplomatic courtesy was no substitute for gains dramatically nailed to a foundation of force. In his memoirs Frederick wrote an aphorism more understandable to the revolutionary age of Mao Zedong than to any "golden age" of the balance of power: "...royal crowns are won

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only by means of big guns."⁵¹ To Frederick, war, instead of a deplorable *ultima ratio* of diplomacy, was almost a lyrical imperative. "The ox must plow the furrow, the nightingale must sing, the dolphin must swim, and I—I must make war," he explained.⁵²

The Prussian system of internal governance was geared almost exclusively to external policy. Internal reforms were undertaken to facilitate the management of statecraft. The middle and lower classes were systematically denied any opportunity for much more than a rudimentary political education. Frederick's leadership, and the myth he created, made Prussia the most absolute system in European history. Prussia was, perhaps, the only real precursor of 20th-century totalitarianism and, in fact, contributed to many of the myths that buttressed the Third Reich.⁵³ As one historian, Koppel Pinson, explained,

By his cult of military force and by his own example of military success, he implanted in Prussia, and through Prussia in Germany, their inordinate reliance on military strength which both the Germany of Bismarck and Hitler were to follow. He became the supreme example of the amoral national hero who hovered over and above the everyday concepts of good and evil.⁵⁴

Prussia and Russia, as the parvenu states of Europe, faced few inhibitions about the limits of *raison d'état*. To them, security was what social scientists would today call a "zero sum" game. If you did not maintain and nourish security interests, others would see that course of action as weakness and would make you their prey. As Catherine the Great explained, aggrandizement, not negotiation or mutual undertaking, is the object of statecraft. "He who gains nothing, loses" she concluded.⁵⁵

In the 17th century the balance of power after the Treaty of Westphalia

was maintained by the German-Spanish connection. When that connection was broken, the Austrian house of Hapsburg and most of the houses of Germany were strong enough to maintain on the frontier of Europe a bulwark against Ottoman and Russian invasions. Even in their weakened state, the royal houses of Austria and Germany were, in the minds of many observers, the linchpin of European order. As the Abbe de Saint Pierre wrote:

The real strength of the existing order is... to be found partly in the play of conflicting policies which... keep each other mutually in check. But there is another bulwark more formidable yet. This is the Germanic Body, which lies almost in the centre of Europe and holds all other parts in their place, serving... for the protection of its neighbours [by]... its size and by the number and valour of its component peoples... make it the rock on which all schemes of conquest are doomed infallibly to break... so long as that constitution endures, the balance of Europe will never be broken... and the Treaty of Westphalia will perhaps forever remain the foundation of our international system.⁵⁶

After Frederick, the fundamental territorial alignments and moral assumptions of the Westphalia system

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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were subjected to strains from which the old order would never really recover. The "golden age" of the balance of power was a fleeting moment, partially realized. Memory seems to exaggerate the durability of the most temperate features of the balance of power.

Nonetheless, many students of international affairs seem to harbor a subconscious urge to locate empirically an idyllum. Perhaps there is reassurance in the thought that an international system predicated on power can, after all, find a tolerable order.

NOTES

1. See Albert Sorel, *Europe and the French Revolution: The Political Traditions of the Old Regime* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1971), pp. 33-35; and Penfield Roberts, *The Quest for Security: 1715-1740* (New York: Harper, 1947), pp. 2-3 and 37 *passim*.

2. Robert R. Palmer, *A History of the Modern World*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1960), p. 243.

3. Roberts, p. 4.

4. H.T. Dickenson, *Bolingbroke* (London: Constable, 1970), p. 254.

5. John V. Nef, *War and Human Progress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 165 and 254, *passim*.

6. David Hume, "Of the Jealousy of Trade," *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1898), v. 2, p. 348.

7. As Walter Dorn put it: "What appears absurd as an economic measure may be sound common sense from the point of view of military strategy. Great Britain and France fought each other with navigation acts and the 'Exclusif' with navies and privateers, by keeping their respective trade routes open and closing those of their rival, but they fought also with normal peacetime commerce and shipping, with trade monopolies and the economic self-sufficiency of their respective colonial empires. Thus, power politics and economic policy became interchangeable terms." Walter L. Dorn, *Competition for Empire: 1740-1763* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1940), p. 9.

8. John B. Wolf, *The Emergence of the Great Powers, 1685-1715* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), p. 174, *passim*.

9. Richard A. Preston and Sydney F. Wise, *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and Its Interrelationships with Western Society*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 140.

10. See Frederick's comments in Frederick the Great, *Posthumous Works*, "History of My Own Times," v. I, book I (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789), pp. 71-72. Hereafter, Frederick's *Posthumous Works* are cited by title and volume number.

11. Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 115.

12. Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Origins of Modern Germany* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), p. 400.

13. Henri De Catt, *Frederick the Great: The Memoirs of His Reader* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), v. I, pp. 60-63.

14. Frederick the Great, "History of My Own Times," book I, p. 108.

15. See Frederick's own account of European reaction in *ibid.*, pp. 108 and 151.

16. Edith Simon, *The Making of Frederick the Great* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 216 and Louis L. Snyder and Ida Mae Baker, *Frederick the Great: Prussian Warrior and Statesman* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1968), p. 68.

17. Alfred Cobban, *National Self-Determination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 170-71.

18. A point Karl Marx would later make: "If [territorial] limits are to be fixed by military interests, there will be no end to claims, because every military line is necessarily faulty and may be improved by annexing some outlying territory; and moreover, they can never be fixed finally and fully because they always must be imposed by the conqueror upon the conquered and consequently carry with them the seeds of fresh wars." Karl Marx, "Second Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association on the Franco-Prussian War," *Selected Works*, ed. V. Adoratsky (New York: International Publishers, 1936), v. I, p. 441.

19. Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 39.

20. Charles D'Avenant, *Essays: I. The Balance of Power; II. The Right of Making War, Peace and Alliances; III. Universal Monarchy* (London: Printed for James Knapton at the Crown in St. Paul's Churchyard, 1701), p. 291.

21. Frederick the Great, Letter no. XXXI, to Jordan, 3 March 1741, "Correspondence," v. IX, p. 63.

22. As Frederick told his reader, "My father would want me to be a soldier, but he never suspected that one day I should in this respect be what I am. How astonished he would be . . . he would not believe his

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own eyes." De Catt, p. 131. De Catt adds that on a "thousand occasions" he would come back to this matter of his father's esteem, *ibid.*, p. 132. Frederick confided, "... [E]ven amid the pleasures I enjoy, the image of my father rises up before me to weaken them. ... In spite of all... I have not ceased to venerate." De Catt, v. II, p. 136. Frederick said this when he was almost 50 years old, a time when his dreams were still obsessed with memories of his father's beatings and anger. De Catt, v. I, p. 64.

23. Frederick the Great, "History of My Own Times," book I, p. 174.

24. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 3d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1960), p. 221.

25. Nathan Ausubel, *Superman: The Life of Frederick the Great* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1931), p. 533.

26. Cited in Albert Sorel, *Europe Under the Old Regime* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 19.

27. As Frederick stated, "Princes should personally watch the proceedings of their neighbors. They should apply themselves with extreme attention to their plans, and anticipate their enterprise. They should take the precaution which good alliances afford against the politics of these turbulent spirits that never cease... like the canker, eat into and consume whatever they touch." *Posthumous Works*, v. 4, p. 386.

28. *Ibid.*, v. 5, p. 17. Also see Frederick's purported remarks in Heinrich von Treitschke, *The Confessions of Frederick the Great and the Life of Frederick the Great* (New York: Putnam, 1915), p. 69.

29. Frederick's "Preface" of his "History of My Own Times," pp. xiv-xvi.

30. D.B. Horn, *Frederick the Great and the Rise of Prussia* (London: English University Press, 1964), p. 33.

31. Cited in J. Ellis Barker, *Foundations of Germany* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1917, 1970), pp. 86-87. See also Gerhard Ritter, *Frederick the Great: A Historical Profile* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 82.

32. Ausubel, pp. 608-609.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 609.

34. De Catt, v. II, p. 30. In another instance of his remarkable behavior, Frederick wrote a "rough draft" of the *Letter of Madame Pompadour to the Queen of Hungary* which demanded the reinstitution of chastity. It was "accidentally" published, Frederick told Voltaire. De Catt, v. II, p. 13.

35. Francois de Callieres, *On the Matter of Negotiating with Princes; on the Uses of Diplomacy; the Choice of Ministers and Envoys; and the Personal Qualities Necessary for Success in Missions Abroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), p. 48.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 55 and 111. To De Callieres, it was important that an ambassador be a "good Christian" with a "well-equipped service" and also he a "man of letters," *ibid.*, p. 62.

37. Treitschke, p. 72.

38. Ausubel, p. 546. As Frederick confided to De Catt: "I often hide my designs from those who are about me. I even mislead them, because suspecting what I have in my mind they might speak about it... I can only save myself by secrecy." De Catt, v. I, p. 14.

39. Ritter, p. 93.

40. Nancy Mitford, *Frederick the Great* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 273.

41. Edmund Burke, *Correspondence of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke; between the Year 1744 and the Period of His Decease in 1797* (London: F. & J. Ribington, 1844), v. I, p. 403.

42. Robert B. Mowat, *A History of European Diplomacy: 1451-1789* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1928), pp. 275-276.

43. Sorel, *Europe Under the Old Regime*, p. 31.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

45. Mitford, p. 229. Even Frederick was taken aback by the behavior of the Cossacks. De Catt, v. II, p. 54.

46. Sorel, *Europe Under the Old Regime*, p. 72.

47. Some of these issues are raised in Richard N. Rosecrance's "Biopolarity, Multipolarity and the Future," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, v. X, no. 3, 1966, pp. 314-327; and Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics*, April 1964, pp. 390-406. For an argument that "the most stable arrangement would seem to be a world of five or some greater odd number of powers... of approximately equal strength," see Arthur Lee Burns, "From Balance to Deterrence: A Theoretical Analysis," *World Politics*, July 1957, pp. 494-529. Also see Felix Morley, *The Society of Nations* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1932), for an assertion that as the number of states increases arithmetically, the possibility of conflict increases geometrically.

48. Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brede et de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, new ed. (London: G Bell and Sons, 1900), book XIII, no. 17, p. 234.

49. Richard N. Rosecrance, *Action and Reaction in World Politics; International Systems in Perspective* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 27.

50. Sorel, *Europe Under the Old Regime*, p. 21.

51. Barker, pp. 97-98.

52. Ausubel, p. 634.

53. Sorel, *Europe Under the Old Regime*, P. 11.

54. Koppel S. Pinson, *Modern Germany: Its History and Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 6.

55. Horn, p. i.

56. "Abstract of the Abbe de Saint Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace," Murray G. Forsyth, et al., *The Theory of International Relations* (New York: Atherton, 1970), pp. 139-140.

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